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Submit[Privacy policy](#)**MySpace, Facebook, Bebo: Social Networking Students***by Mike Thelwall*

Most of this year's new students are likely to be users of MySpace, Facebook, Bebo or some other social networking software. Studies in the U.S. which suggest that university students will use this software to communicate mainly with their university friends chatting, joking and organising their offline meetings and group work will resonate in the UK – and in other sectors.

Students will probably social network whilst they are at their computer studying rather than at separate times (Golder *et al*, 2007). Although most of this activity is hidden to educators, it is relevant because it is interlaced with studying. This article discusses social networking and gives some background information about MySpace members.



Social networking sites are typically free to join, with members having their own home page with a funny/cool/passport photograph, some basic personal information (e.g., age, gender, location) and sections where they can write about themselves or make a statement. In addition, members of social networking sites generally get a free blog, the most recent entries of which are flagged on the home page. Most importantly, however, members can register with each other as *friends*, a status that typically allows them to use certain means of communication and gives access to more private content (e.g., pictures) on each other's site. Each member's friends are listed on their site, with the pictures of the most important few displayed on the home page. It is very common for friends to communicate by writing public messages in the friend's comments section at the bottom of each home page. Two friends might conduct a conversation by exchanging comment messages on each other's home page. It might go something like this:

- *hi pardeep ent seen u 4 ages u ok? Sarah x*
- *hey sarah just chillin u dun ur assignment?*
- *Yep, wasnt too bad, u 2?*

Other messages may have no real content but serve to maintain contact or to spread some cheer, such as the following (received from a friend in warmer climes):

- *its getting cold here now, about 27 degrees, still lazing around in my boxer shorts though.....*

The interesting thing about these comment conversations is that they are public and can be read by other friends. As such they are part of the online identity of the members, together with the rest of their profiles (Boyd and Heer, 2006). As suggested above, the language used is typically informal and conversational with spelling derived from mobile phone text messaging shorthand. It is also normal for comments to contain an element of swearing, especially for younger users.

Study of MySpace members

Although Facebook has been more popular amongst students, having originally

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been exclusively for their use, MySpace has more users overall. Indeed in the U.S. it seems to be the most visited web site, beating Google (Prescott, 2007), and seems to be particularly widely used amongst younger people and is open for study by researchers using the methods described below. This section summarises the results of an investigation into the MySpace profile of a random sample of US and UK members, selected by their ID (Thelwall, 2007a). The data was extracted from 40,000 randomly chosen profiles of all members (used for most of the results reported below) and 30,000 random profiles from members who joined on July 3, 2006 (for the usage frequency results). The program SocSciBot was used to download and analyse each profile page. Information on profile pages was taken at face value (e.g., declared age and country location) although there is perhaps about 10% misrepresentation, at least in terms of age inflation (Hinduja and Patchin, in press).

The age profile of users in the 40,000 sample was heavily skewed to younger users, although the median age was 21. This is probably partly due to younger members growing older as well as older people joining. There was a slight majority of female users, and females were more likely than males to have private profiles (visible only to friends), although public profiles were the norm in both groups.

The number of friends varies greatly. For those who take MySpace seriously enough to have at least 2 friends, the median friend count is 27 although one member in the data sets had 9,272 friends, and there are people like Tila Tequila who are famous for having over a million. Probably some users' friends are all real friends, others' online friends are predominantly acquaintances (this seems to be *normal* friending) and a few have so many *friends* that they must be predominantly strangers.

Although most members' close MySpace friends match their offline friends (Boyd, 2006), there is an interesting gender twist. Both male and female MySpace members prefer to have a majority of female friends. It seems that the predominance of off-line same sex friendships is not reflected online and both genders recognise that women make the best on-line friends.

In terms of frequency of use, it seems that a third of people who join MySpace give up quickly, perhaps because they had nobody to friend, forgot their password or never intended to do more than investigate social networking. Another third check daily or weekly and hence are able to keep in regular touch with their friends online.

Finally, the informality of language use is supported by the extent of swearing. Figure 1 shows, for U.S. MySpace users (for which there are enough to make a graph), that swearing in MySpace is common, although it declines with age. In the UK there is probably a similar trend, except that there is probably not a gender difference in the extent of swearing used (Thelwall, 2007b).

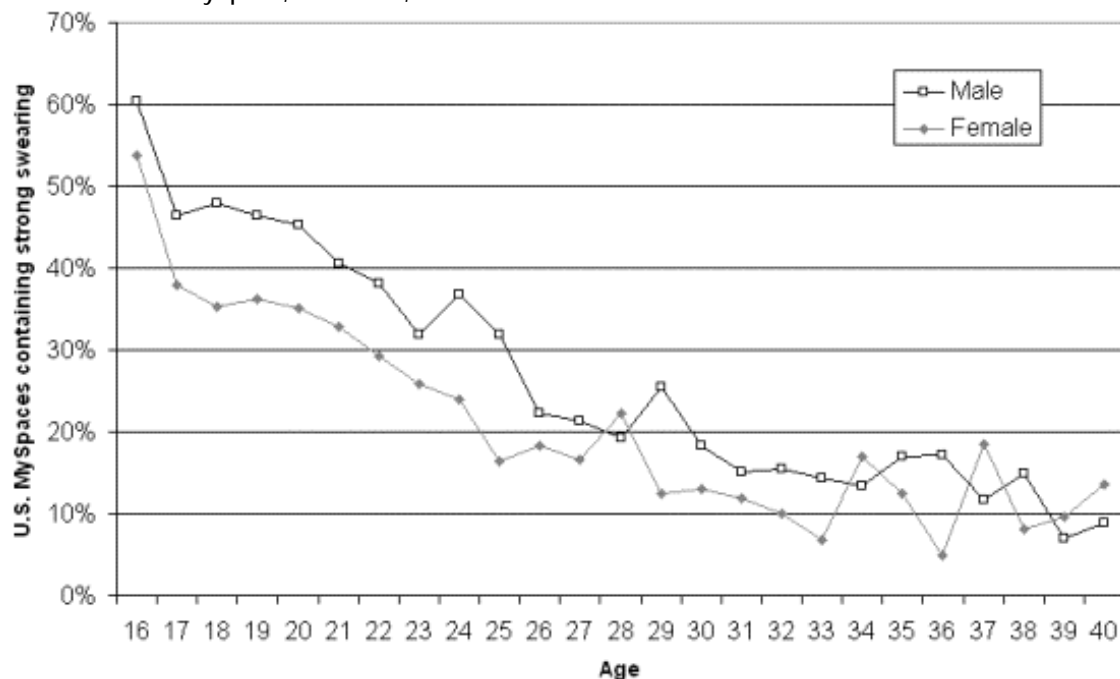


Figure 1. The percentage of U.S. MySpace public profiles containing at least one from a range of 100 swear words of varying strengths (4,659 males, 3,950 females).

The MySpace findings reported above probably apply to some extent to all social networking sites, although there are significant differences because of who uses the sites and the features that each site offers. In particular, Facebook is intrinsically more private than MySpace and seems to have more educated members, probably due to its university roots (Boyd, 2007).

Perhaps the main concern for educators with social networking is that students may be sitting at their computers in *study mode* but spending a proportion of their time socialising online instead. Social networking can be addictive and so it seems likely that some students' studies are adversely affected. In contrast, however, other students may log onto their computer to socialise and then study whilst waiting for messages. Online interaction probably also plays an important social support role, perhaps especially for students who are unconfident with face-to-face communication or have difficulty socialising outside their home due to family responsibilities or mobility problems. Hence, whilst social networking is probably helpful to some students and a time consuming distraction to others, it is not yet clear which is most significant. Hence it may be useful to discuss with students the importance of monitoring and moderating the time spent social networking. Nevertheless, social networking sites are widely used fun computing environments, so can we take advantage and find some useful educational applications?

Here are some suggestions.

- Use the group creation facilities of social networking web sites to set up discussion environments for courses or specific group coursework. Students who are not members can join for free, if necessary, and many students happily run multiple sites anyway. In such groups, accept informal language use as natural to the environment.
- Use the contrast between the (publicly viewable) informal language of social networking sites and the language necessary for typical academic assignments to underpin discussions of professional skills and literacy.
- Set up groups for students on each year of a course to help them find and support each other online.
- Set up support groups for future students to help them make friends before

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